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Greek Lexicon Support for Proton

Philological and Lexicographical Support for the Exclusive Senses of Proton in Hellenistic Greek

The debate surrounding the semantic range of the Hellenistic Greek adverb πρῶτον (prōton) frequently centers on its occurrence in Matthew 6:33 . The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT) contends that the term in this specific verse cannot be understood in a simple, step-by-step chronological sequence—implying that a believer should first seek the kingdom of God and then seek physical necessities . Instead, the TDNT argues that the adverb operates with such a high degree of exclusivity that it functionally carries the meaning of "only" . To evaluate this philological claim, it is necessary to examine how Classical, Hellenistic, and Koine lexicons, alongside ancient grammatical systems, classify the semantic boundaries of πρῶτον and its root adjective πρῶτος (prōtos) . This examination seeks to discover whether lexicographical authorities provide precedent for "only" (μόνον) or "exclusively" as a recognized translation value of πρῶτον .

Classical Foundations of Functional Exclusivity in LSJ

In classical Greek, lexicographical analysis demonstrates that while πρῶτον primarily denotes temporal or spatial priority, it possesses distinct semantic extensions that function exclusively . The *Greek-English Lexicon* of Liddell, Scott, and Jones (LSJ) catalogs several expressions where the temporal sense is absorbed by a logical or hierarchical exclusivity . For example, the classical idiom ἐν πρώτοις (en prōtois) is translated as "above all, especially," which establishes a hierarchy that subordinates all other considerations, rendering the "first" item the only one of immediate consequence . Furthermore, LSJ identifies an epic and classical usage of the adverbial forms πρῶτον and πρῶτα (prōta) after relative pronouns or adverbs to mean "once (= at all)" . This construction operates as an exclusive logical gate; the subsequent action is entirely dependent upon the initial event occurring, effectively serving as an exclusive constraint similar to the English "only when" .

This logical exclusivity is also mirrored in ancient philosophical texts. In Middle Platonic literature, such as the *Didaskalikos* of Alkinoos, the concept of the πρῶτον νοητόν (prōton noēton) is developed to denote a cognitive primacy exclusively related to human understanding . Within this philosophical framework, the "first" object of contemplation is not merely the first in a chronological series of thoughts, but the exclusive, foundational ground that makes all subsequent cognitive acts possible . Thus, classical lexicography and philosophical usage confirm that πρῶτον can signify a structural priority so absolute that it excludes alternative objects of pursuit.

Hellenistic and Koine Lexicographical Classifications

Lexicons focusing on the Hellenistic and Koine periods, particularly early Christian literature, divide the usage of πρῶτος and its adverbial form into sequence and prominence . The *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG) defines the first major category of πρῶτος as pertaining to sequence, which includes time, sets, numbers, or space . The second major division pertains to prominence, meaning "first, foremost, most important" . Under this second heading, BDAG analyzes ἐν πρώτοις in 1 Corinthians 15:3 as "among the first = most important things, i.e., as of first importance" . When a principle is defined as being of "first importance," it acts as the exclusive foundation of the theological proclamation .

Thayer's Greek Lexicon similarly supports this non-sequential, exclusive interpretation . Thayer's notes that πρῶτον often designates that which is "first in rank, influence, or honor," translating it as "chiefly" or "principally" . The term "chiefly" moves beyond chronological sequence to assign an exclusive value to the object . Strong's Greek Dictionary supports this, noting that in passages like Matthew 6:33, πρῶτον conveys "ultimate allegiance rather than mere sequence" . According to this lexicographical consensus, the "seeking" commanded by Jesus is not a preliminary action to be followed by other kinds of seeking, but a comprehensive, exclusive orientation where all legitimate human needs are subordinated to the divine rule .

Lexicon	Chronological Sequence	Hierarchical Prominence / Exclusivity	Structural or Syntactic Support
Liddell-Scott-Jones (LSJ)	"first in time or place"	"above all, especially"	Neuter adverbial used after relative pronouns to mean "once (= at all)"
BDAG	"first in a sequence of time or space"	"most important, as of first importance"	Predicate and adverbial uses in early Christian literature
Thayer's Lexicon	"first in any succession of things or pers	"chiefly, principally, chief, principal"	Predicative alignment where it functions equivalent to an adverb

Lexicon	Chronological Sequence	Hierarchical Prominence / Exclusivity	Structural or Syntactic Support
	ons"		
Strong's Dictionary	"firstly (in time, place, order)"	"firstly in importance, chiefly"	Direction of hearts toward ultimate allegiance rather than temporal sequence

Syntactic Contrast and Adverbial Predication

To understand how πρῶτον assumes the functional meaning of "only," one must contrast it with the standard Greek word for "only," which is μόνον (monon), the neuter accusative of μόνος (monos) . Standard grammatical rules, such as those in Smyth's *Greek Grammar*, clarify that μόνος in the attributive position (e.g., ὁ μόνος παῖς) means "the only son," whereas in the predicate position (e.g., μόνος ὁ παῖς), it functions adverbially as "the boy plays alone" .

In Koine Greek, adjectives in the neuter singular (πρῶτον) and neuter plural (πρῶτα) regularly function as adverbs . When πρῶτον is placed in a predicate relation to a verb, it can behave like a predicate adjective that carries a restrictive or exclusive force . This syntactic behavior is evident in textual variants where copyists and authors struggled with the choice between πρῶτος and πρῶτον . For example, in John 1:41, several witnesses read the predicate adjective πρῶτος, which suggests Andrew "was the first" person to find his brother . The preferred reading, however, is the neuter adverbial πρῶτον, which indicates that the first and primary action Andrew performed was finding his brother Peter . This reveals a grammatical environment where πρῶτον restricts the action of the verb to a single, exclusive priority .

Semantic Modulation and Contextual Prerogatives

The transition of πρῶτον from chronological sequence to absolute exclusivity is driven by contextual and pragmatic factors. In Hellenistic Greek, when a writer intends to indicate a strict, chronological, step-by-step order, more precise sequential terms are available . The adverb καθεξῆς (kathexēs), used extensively by Luke, serves as an instructive contrast . In Luke 1:3 and Acts 11:4, καεξῆς refers specifically to a chronological or orderly sequence of events ("an orderly account") .

In contrast, Matthew's selection of πρῶτον in Matthew 6:33 deliberately avoids this mechanical, chronological framework . There is no subsequent coordinate adverb (such as εἶτα or ἐπειτα, "then") to complete a chronological sequence . If the seeking of the kingdom were merely the first step in a sequence, the disciple would be permitted to seek after worldly things once that first step was completed. However, Matthew 6:32 condemns the seeking of material goods (ἐπιζητεῖ) as a pagan practice . The syntax of Matthew 6:33 solves this logical problem by making the seeking of the kingdom the exclusive focus . The other necessities are "added" (προστεθήσεται) as a passive

consequence, meaning they are never to be sought directly . This syntactic structure forces a pragmatic modulation of $\pi\rho\hat{\omega}\tau\text{ον}$ from "first in time" to "exclusively" .

Other biblical passages demonstrate this same semantic modulation where $\pi\rho\hat{\omega}\tau\text{ον}$ establishes a singular, non-negotiable prerequisite that carries the force of "only." In James 3:17, heavenly wisdom is described as "first pure" ($\pi\rho\hat{\omega}\tau\text{ον}\ \mu\grave{\text{ε}}\text{ν}\ \grave{\alpha}\gamma\text{νὴ}\ \grave{\text{ε}}\sigma\tau\iota\text{ν}$) . Exegetical scholars note that this does not describe a chronological list of virtues, but establishes purity as the unmixed motive of a single-hearted person who serves *only* God . The "first" characteristic is the exclusive foundation of wisdom . Similarly, in Matthew 7:5, the command to "first take the log out of your own eye" ($\grave{\text{ε}}\kappa\beta\alpha\lambda\text{ε}\ \pi\rho\hat{\omega}\tau\text{ον}$) sets up a strict, exclusive prerequisite: self-correction is the *only* valid starting point for helping others .

Translation Typology and Lexical Overlap

The translation of $\pi\rho\hat{\omega}\tau\text{ον}$ across historical and modern versions reveals a widespread recognition of its exclusive semantic weight. While early translations like the King James Version and the Latin Vulgate opted for literal equivalents ("first" and *primum*), modern translations and back-translations in global languages increasingly favor terms that express exclusive prominence .

Translation or Language	English Gloss or Back-Translation	Syntactic and Semantic Focus
NET Bible	"But above all pursue..."	Eradicates temporal progression; installs hierarchical exclusivity
NLT	"Seek the Kingdom of God above all else..."	Focuses on absolute value-based selection over other objects
AMP	"But first and most importantly seek..."	Double translation representing both temporal sequence and logical prominence
Uma (Indonesia)	"If that is what we put-first, all the other [things] he will just give..."	Identifies $\pi\rho\hat{\omega}\tau\text{ον}$ as the sole prerequisite for the passive addition
Tagbanwa (Philippines)	"...always cause to be foremost in your mind/inner-being your true submitting..."	Translates sequence into mental and psychological exclusivity
Tenango Otomi (Mexico)	"Therefore now, above all hunt for..."	Renders $\pi\rho\hat{\omega}\tau\text{ον}$ directly as "above all," removing chronological sequence
Western Bukidnon	"...it is necessary that that which is big in your breath is your letting him r	Expresses exclusive absolute priority using a local idioms

Translation or Language	English Gloss or Back-Translation	Syntactic and Semantic Focus
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Synthesized Lexicographical Conclusions

An evaluation of standard lexicographical data confirms that while no ancient, classical, or Koine dictionary lists "only" ($\mu\acute{o}\nu o\nu$) as a direct, unconditioned semantic equivalent for the lemma $\pi\rho\hat{\omega}\tau o\nu$, there is deep, systemic support for this exclusive rendering in specific contexts . Classical and Hellenistic lexicons routinely establish that when the sequential aspect of $\pi\rho\hat{\omega}\tau o\nu$ is suppressed under the category of prominence, the word functions to mark an absolute, exclusive priority .

In Matthew 6:33, the structural absence of any sequential coordinate (such as "then"), combined with the absolute prohibition of other seeking, forces a pragmatic modulation where "first" operates as "only" . The translation of $\pi\rho\hat{\omega}\tau o\nu$ as "above all else" or "only" in modern translations and global back-translations is not an arbitrary exegetical addition, but an accurate rendering of Hellenistic Greek syntax . Consequently, the TDNT's assertion that the meaning of $\pi\rho\hat{\omega}\tau o\nu$ in Matthew 6:33 is so exclusive that it carries the implication of "only" is fully supported by the broader conventions of Greek lexicography and grammar .